



293rd INFANTRY



Guard Soldiers at War

Story and Photos by MSG Bob Haskell

“THE Thugs,” as they call themselves with a certain sense of pride, have learned about going to war in ways that no street gang could ever imagine.

The 24 Army National Guard infantrymen who compose the mortar platoon for the 1st Battalion, 293rd Infantry Regiment, from Fort Wayne, Ind., joined the brotherhood of combat infantry veterans during a long, anxious night almost a year ago (in March), while guarding a captured ammunition supply point in southern Iraq.

Having moved into enemy territory, where they held their ground after the first week of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Soldiers of the platoon demonstrated that the Army Guard is not only primed for the fight, but can handle itself well under the most stressful situation.

“We have validated ourselves to the active Army. Seven years of hard work and training have paid off,” said LTC Ivan Denton, the 1st Bn. commander, about his 650 light-infantry Soldiers and other Army National

Guard infantry units that have been involved in the second Gulf war.

The 1st Bn., 293rd Inf., is part of Indiana’s 76th Inf. Brigade, which became one of the Guard’s 15 separate and enhanced brigades in the mid-1990s.

National Guard infantrymen did not participate in combat during Operation Desert Storm, when a coalition force drove the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. But, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, seven Army Guard infantry battalions had served in Iraq by early September. That’s because the Army needed all the help it could get, said COL Glenn Walker, chief of the Guard’s Public Affairs Office in Kuwait.

All told, some 29,000 Army National Guard Soldiers from 708 units were operating in the Iraq-Kuwait theater by September, Walker said, and the Soldiers of the 1st Bn., 293rd Inf., led the way. They’ve been in Iraq longer than any Army infantry unit, Walker said. As many as 640 of the unit’s members spent longer than four months in Iraq.

A total of 476 of those Soldiers received the Army’s Combat Infantryman Badge, and 31 earned the Combat Medic Badge, both for participating in

ground combat against an enemy force.

Additionally, LTG H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, pinned Bronze Stars on Denton, MAJ Ronald Westfall, MAJ Eric Bray, CPT Eric Derue, CPT Wesley Russell and CSM John Runge.

Ironically, no one thought the unit would actually go into Iraq. It was mobilized in October 2002, to provide rear-area security for Patriot missiles, and for seaports and airports in Kuwait, where U.S.-led coalition ground forces were massing to invade Iraq.

The mobilization order arrived three days after Denton had officially taken command of the battalion.

“I thought, ‘Lord have mercy. Welcome to command,’” said the former active-duty ranger, who had seen combat in Panama in 1989.

Soldiers of the battalion went into overdrive. Half of the unit flew into Kuwait on Jan. 3, heavily armed, because “we didn’t know what we were stepping into,” Denton said. All of his Soldiers were in country by Jan. 20. Two days later, the ship carrying the battalion’s Humvees arrived.

National Guard units were among the first units to arrive in the Persian

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▲ Indiana Army National Guard Soldiers remove mortar rounds from an Iraqi bunker at Tallil Air Base.

Gulf from the United States, in preparation for war.

The Soldiers guarded docks at the Shuiaba Port on the Persian Gulf, and pulled security at Kuwait International Airport, protective measures against possible terrorist attacks and sabotage, as equipment and troops began pouring into the country.

They also patrolled the perimeter at Camp Arifjan, south of Kuwait City, to protect Soldiers who were organizing for the invasion.

Remaining in Kuwait seemed to be the National Guard Soldiers' fate, and Denton told them it was highly unlikely they would go into Iraq.

But, on March 26, they began escorting elements of the 3rd Inf. Division into Iraq.

"We had a lot to do in a short time," said 1LT Andrew Weaver, who was told to get his 20-man scout platoon across the border and close to the Tallil Air Base, near the Iraqi city of Al Nasiriyah, in 24 hours.

His team passed destroyed Iraqi artillery pieces and smoldering Iraqi tanks as they entered the country across a network of defensive ditches, and moved toward some of the heaviest fighting of the war.

The reality of war hit home when Soldiers of the battalion's mortar platoon were ordered to secure a

sprawling ammo supply point next to the Tallil Air Base, to prevent terrorists from using the bullets, rocket-propelled grenades and anti-aircraft missiles against the Americans.

The rest of the battalion took up positions around the air base.

Armed with automatic weapons mounted on Humvees, the two-dozen mortar men replaced an active-Army mechanized unit that had been guarding the supply point with Bradley fighting vehicles. The Bradleys had engaged enemy personnel, and their crews had reason to believe the Guard Soldiers would also be targeted.

"None of us slept that night," said SFC Scott MacGregor, the mortar-platoon sergeant, who positioned his men at the main entrance to the supply point and at an observation post several miles away.

"It was an eerie feeling," MacGregor said. "We could hear the fighting in the city, six or seven miles away. There was fighting all around us. We were out there by ourselves," said MacGregor.

The enemy didn't come that night. Still, MacGregor said, "The Thugs" lived up to his expectations. They stayed on their toes. They looked out for one another. And, after being relieved the following day, they set up

a firebase, so they could support the rest of the battalion if needed.

The success of those first couple of days set the tone for the next four months. The Indiana Soldiers continued to operate around Tallil and in the Al Nasiriyah area. Their job was to keep the base secure, so that Air Force A-10 attack aircraft could fly their sorties, an 82nd Airborne Division brigade combat team could land its men and equipment, and Army rangers could train there and then fly off to rescue PFC Jessica Lynch.

The battalion returned to Kuwait in late July in anticipation of orders that would send the men home and end their year-long mobilization.

There's no telling how the experience will affect the battalion in years to come, said Denton, but he is certain about one thing.

"If these Soldiers had not gotten into Iraq, they would have been let down," he said. "They would have felt that they had not been used to their full capability. I'm glad they got their chance to prove themselves." ■



76th INFANTRY BRIGADE